

**The Bolshevik Revolution and Russian Orthodox Christian Monasticism**

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*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

*- Revelation 2:10*



*Dedicated in memory of all the Eastern Orthodox Christian New Martyrs and Confessors  
of the 20th Century. May they always intercede on our behalf.*

## **Introduction**

In the twentieth century, the Russian Orthodox Christian Church experienced an era of great persecution while under the ruling power of the Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin. While one may believe that monasticism may not have been impacted by the social changes in government and politics at the time, given that by-and-large monastic communities tend to be secluded in physical location and therefore secluded from worldly affairs, such a presumption is wholly inaccurate. In this paper I provide, first, the historical backdrop that demonstrates what led to the Bolsheviks attacking the Church and second, I provide a historical survey of how monasticism was directly impacted by the Bolsheviks in the twentieth century. Indeed, the Bolsheviks disbanded monastic communities and confiscated monastery property as a matter of official policy, but the ultimate fate of each spanned a whole spectrum: martyrdom, exile, labor camps, clandestine struggle for monastics, and the destruction or repurposing of monastic holdings as agricultural communes, museums, or in the best case, parish churches.

### **1. The Bolshevik Revolution: Historical Backdrop**

In the twentieth century, Russian Orthodox Christian monasticism underwent large-scale persecution by the Bolsheviks in a variety of ways: martyrdom, exile, labor camps, clandestineness, and confiscation, destruction, or repurposing of monasteries as agricultural collectives, museums, and parish churches. In the early 1900s, Russia existed as an impoverished country. The cause of this varied. The country invested in costly wars (i.e., Crimean War 1854-1856), endured harsh climate changes unfavorable to agriculture, and experienced population booms. These circumstances created food shortages, overcrowding, and destitute living found in many cities such as Moscow and St. Petersburg (1905, February 1917). Subsequently, people

protested vehemently leading to events such as the Bloody Sunday Massacre of 1905 and Russian Revolution of 1905.<sup>1</sup>

Twelve years later (February 1917), a revolution broke out with angry industrial workers protesting once again. A provisional government was established to fix issues of food shortages and starvation. In November of 1917, the Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin established a coup d'état against the provisional government. "The provisional government had been assembled by a group of leaders from Russia's bourgeois capitalist class. Lenin instead called for a Soviet government that would be ruled directly by councils of soldiers, peasants and workers."<sup>2</sup> By 1923, Lenin and the Bolsheviks overthrew the government and established the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, between 1921-1923 Russia experienced the Great Famine. The drastic measures people had to take in order to survive as well as the amount of lives that endured starvation, sickness, poverty, and death cannot go unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> The timing of the Great Famine, however, provided the perfect opportunity for the Bolsheviks "... to inflict large-scale damage on the Church" since She was most vulnerable at this time and "... remained the only significant anti-communist force in the country."<sup>4</sup>

So the Bolsheviks were compelled to resort to warfare with a far higher ideological content - a content, moreover, of a much more sophisticated kind than had been produced before. In the party's May, 1921 plenum Lenin supported a resolution calling for the replacement of the religious worldview by a 'harmonious communist scientific system embracing and answering the questions to which peasants' and workers' masses have hitherto sought answers in religion.' The result was the suspension of the "dilettantist" anti-religious commissions (Lenin's phrase) which had existed up to that time, and their replacement by a Commission on the Separation of Church and State attached to Politburo

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<sup>1</sup> "Russian Revolution," *history.com*, <https://www.history.com/topics/russia/russian-revolution>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> See "American Descriptions of the Volga Famine," *SovietHistory.msu.edu*, August 26, 2015, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/famine-of-1921-22/famine-of-1921-22-texts/american-descriptions-of-the-volga-famine/>. See also Vladimir Moss, *The Russian Golgotha* (Canada: Monastery Press, 2006), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Moss, 24-28.

which lasted until 1929 under the leadership of Emelian Yaroslavsky and whose aim was clearly the expiration of all religion.<sup>5</sup>

The Bolsheviks saw two ways they could attack the Church substantially. One way was to strip churches of their liturgical supplies. During the Great Famine, the Church had created committees to provide funds for those in need of food. However, "... to have permitted any *direct* help to go straight from the Church into the mouths of those who were starving would have undermined the dictatorship of the proletariat" and therefore "the committees were banned, and the funds... were confiscated and turned over to the state and to the treasury."<sup>6</sup> As an alternative, the State Commission for Famine Relief *Omgol* suggested that the Church voluntarily sell non-liturgical items to help feed the poor. However, this was eventually changed by the secretive All-Russian Central Executive Committee in February of 1921 which forced the churches to sell all items, including liturgical ones too, an act forbidden and punished by the Canons of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church.<sup>7</sup> As one scholar notes, the All-Russian Central Executive Committee acted "... with maximal cruelty, not stopping at anything, including executions on the spot... [and] interrogations with torture... It literally rushed like a hurricane through Russia, sweeping away... everything in its path."<sup>8</sup> Many resistance clashes took place, 1,414 of which were

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Apostolic Canon 73 and Canon 10 of the First-Second Council cited in Moss, 28. "This commission must secretly prepare the political, organizational and technical aspects of the matter at the same time. The actual removal of the valuables must begin already in March and then be completed in the shortest amount of time... I repeat: this commission is a complete secret... Our whole strategy at this time may be aimed at a schism in the clergy over the concrete question of the requisitioning of valuables from the churches" (Leon Trotsky). See Moss, 28. "A decree of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee on February 26: *all* valuables were to be requisitioned from the churches - for the starving!" See also Aleksander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (London: Vintage UK, 2002), 342-344. "You see now, the Patriarch gave the order to give up all valuables from the churches, but they belonged to the Church!" (Elder Nectarius of Optina). See also Evgenia Rymarenko, "Remembrance of Optina Staretz Hieroschemamonk Nektary," *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (May-June 1986): 39.

<sup>8</sup> "We can (and therefore must) carry out the confiscation of valuables with fanatical and merciless energy and not hesitate to suppress any form of resistance... It is precisely now and only now that the vast majority of the peasant masses will either support us or at least will be unable to give any decisive support to those... who might and would want to try to resist the Soviet decree... Now our victory over the reactionary clergy is guaranteed" (Lenin). See Moss, 29.

officially reported. On March 15, 1921, five Christians died and 15 were wounded. Between 1921-23, over 2,000 married priests, 1,000 monks, 3,000 nuns, and innumerable laymen were executed.<sup>9</sup>

The second way that the Bolsheviks sought to attack the Church was through “divide and rule.”

An important aspect of the Commission's strategy was the tactic of “divide and rule.” For, although physical methods continued to be applied, the Bolsheviks recognized that such a formidable enemy as the Church could not be defeated by direct physical assault alone, and that they needed subtler methods including *the recruitment of agents among the clergy and the creation of schisms among them*. Thus already in December, 1920, T. Samsonov, head of a secret department of the Cheka, the forerunner of the KGB, wrote to Dzerzhinsky that ‘... No machinery can destroy religion except that of the [Cheka]. In its plans to demoralize the church the Cheka has recently focused its attention on the rank and file of the priesthood. Only through them, by long, intensive, and painstaking work, shall we succeed in destroying and dismantling the church completely.’... Again, in 1921, in the protocol of the secret section of the Cheka... recruiting clergy with money to report on themselves and others in the Church and *to prevent anti-Bolshevik agitation concerning*, for example, the closing of monasteries [was discussed].<sup>10</sup>

The Bolsheviks wanted to create *internal* turmoil within the Church just as much as they exerted *external* turmoil through the confiscation of Her valuables. As Leon Trotsky was once reported saying, the Bolsheviks would do this by creating a schism within the clerical ranks.<sup>11</sup> This came to be known as the Renovationist Controversy. The Bolsheviks counted on the “modernist” or “rennovist” clergy (“Living Church”) within the Church to begin a retaliation against the traditions of the Church in order to be loyal to the Bolsheviks. Thus, the major renovation(s) the Bolsheviks tried advocating for was changing the order and nature of clerical life. This included

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 24, 29. 28 bishops and 1,414 priests were killed in 1918-19. In 1922, 2,233 clergy and two million laymen were killed. And between 1917-22 in Petrograd 550 clergy and monastics were killed. See also *Russkaia pravoslaviana tserkov' i kommunisticheskoe gosudarstvo 1917-1941* (Moscow: 1996), 69. See also Alfred Gastavson, *The Catacomb Church* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Monastery Press, 1960), 34. See also Anatoly Latyshev, “Provyesti besposhadnij Massovij Terror Protiv Popov,” *Argumenty i Fakty*, 26, (1996).

<sup>10</sup> Moss, 25.

<sup>11</sup> “We must take a decisive initiative in creating a schism among the clergy” (Leon Trotsky). Ibid., 31.

monastic bishops marrying while keeping their rank of episcopacy, celibate clergy marrying after ordination or being able to remarry and/or marrying widows, and married priests being ordained to the episcopacy.<sup>12</sup> The Renovationist controversy grew so violent and dangerous that Christians were forced to worship underground in catacombs, 30% of which were hierarchs.<sup>13</sup> This was only the beginning of an era of great persecution for Russian Orthodox Christians which grew more intense over time and eventually negatively impacting monks, nuns and their communities.

## **2. Monasticism and Bolshevism in the 20th century**

Twentieth century Russian Orthodox Christian monasticism experienced persecution by the Bolsheviks in many ways: martyrdom, exile, labor camps, clandestineness, and confiscation, destruction, or repurposing of monasteries as agricultural collectives, museums, and/or parish churches. As stated before, one may be led to believe that monastic communities would not be affected by the political changes and persecutions going on in Russia during the Bolshevik

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<sup>12</sup> See "Living Church," *en.wikipedia.org*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Living\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Living_Church). "The Revolution of February 1917 gave the Orthodox Church of Russia an opportunity for the reform long hoped for by many churchmen but delayed by the tsarist regime. In a church council convened in Moscow on Aug. 15, 1917, the patriarchate, abolished by Peter the Great, was restored. The newly elected patriarch, Tikhon, adopted an attitude of total independence, if not hostility, toward the communist regime that had overthrown the provisional government. In 1922, however, the government unilaterally decided to confiscate all church valuables, under the official pretext that there was general starvation in large sections of the country. When the patriarch insisted on some church control over the confiscated property, he was placed under house arrest and the offices of the patriarchate were closed. Seizing the opportunity for a revolution in the church, a group of priests, notably Aleksandr Vvedensky and Vladimir Krasnitsky, organized a Temporary Higher Church Administration, which rapidly evolved into a general movement aimed at deposing the patriarch and introducing radical church reforms. The Temporary Administration found support among some bishops, but it was particularly popular with the "white," or married, clergy, who were excluded from promotion into the episcopacy by canon law and who resented the supremacy of unmarried monastics. The movement was also supported by progressive intellectuals and enjoyed the sympathy of the government. In a series of councils, the Renovated Church, after deposing Tikhon, reestablished a Holy Synod of bishops, priests, and laymen, originally proclaimed by Peter the Great in 1721 to replace the patriarchate, to rule the church. It introduced controversial reforms in the episcopate and in the liturgy, but the movement was compromised by the clearly fraudulent character of the takeover: in their struggle against the patriarch and his followers, its leaders cooperated with the secret police, and hundreds of Tikhonite clergy were executed as counterrevolutionaries." See also "Renovated Church," *britannica.com*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Renovated-Church>. See also "Living Church," *orthodoxwiki.org*, [https://orthodoxwiki.org/Living\\_Church](https://orthodoxwiki.org/Living_Church).

<sup>13</sup> According to Archbishop Lazarus Zhurbenko, "the catacombs began in 1922, when Renovationism began. The Optina elders blessed the Christians to go into the catacombs. The first catacombs known to us were formed in the town of Kozolvsk..." See Moss, 59, 102.



Revolution given that monastic communities are usually established in rural areas such as in the desert(s) or forest(s). It appears that in some cases people have also thought this way in relation to monasteries having contact with urban areas populated with merchants and locals seeking to sell merchandise. But in instances such as this as well as in the case of the relationship between government and monasticism in twentieth century Russia, such presumptions are historically inaccurate.<sup>14</sup> “For the Bolsheviks, monasteries were bastions of the older order that had to be swept away. They suspected monasteries of being “nests of counterrevolution” and therefore a real threat to their hold on power...”<sup>15</sup> The Bolsheviks attacked the monasteries in two major ways: property conflicts and extreme persecution via exile, labor camps, clandestineness, and death.

## **2a. Land Conflicts:**

Before the Bolsheviks attacked the monasteries there was another group that created conflict with monastic communities: the peasants. As monasticism in Russia grew rapidly in the years before and during the Bolshevik Revolution there was more contact between peasants and monastics.<sup>16</sup> Monasteries had at times been given land and property rights from noble

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<sup>14</sup> See Doron Bar, “Rural Monasticism as a Key Element in the Christianization of Byzantine Palestine,” *The Harvard Theological Review* Vol. 98, No. 1 (January 2005). See also Scott Kenworthy, “Monasticism in War and Revolution,” in *Russia’s Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22 Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 222. Available at [https://www.academia.edu/30578696/Monasticism\\_in\\_War\\_and\\_Revolution](https://www.academia.edu/30578696/Monasticism_in_War_and_Revolution). See also Samuel Bournelis, “Sabaite Monasticism and Its Contributions To the Ecclesiastical and Civil Communities of the Byzantine Empire,” *academia.edu*, October 3, 2018, [https://www.academia.edu/37983890/Sabaite\\_Monasticism\\_and\\_its\\_Contributions\\_To\\_the\\_Ecclesiastical\\_and\\_Civil\\_Communities\\_of\\_the\\_Byzantine\\_Empire](https://www.academia.edu/37983890/Sabaite_Monasticism_and_its_Contributions_To_the_Ecclesiastical_and_Civil_Communities_of_the_Byzantine_Empire).

<sup>15</sup> “Their second assumption—that monasticism was a pillar of popular religious belief and practice, which stood in the way of building a new society based on scientific atheism—was on target. Consequently monasteries became an early and key target of the anti-religious campaign...” See Kenworthy, “Monasticism in War and Revolution,” in *Russia’s Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22 Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 235. See also Scott Kenworthy, “Monasticism in Russian History,” in *Kritia: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, 2 (Spring 2009): 326. See also Moss, 25.

<sup>16</sup> “Monasticism was centrally important for medieval Russian Orthodoxy; 18th-century Russian rulers, however, restricted it because they viewed monasticism as contrary to the needs of constructing a modern state. Their efforts culminating in Catherine the Great’s confiscation of monastic property in 1764 that also resulted in the closure of



landowners which peasants worked on from time to time to eventually gain emancipation. But the peasants seemed to never have lost an emotional connection with the land they once worked on after they had been set free. Thus, "... monasteries themselves were usually not attacked, but rather peasants took over specific lands they felt to be theirs... Such episodes were less an expression of hostility against monasteries as such than assertions of peasant justice in reclaiming what they regarded as rightfully theirs."<sup>17</sup>

However, as time went on fewer peasants attempted to steal monastic lands and property rights and a more threatening and powerful group rose up to attack monastic communities: the Bolsheviks.<sup>18</sup> On October 26, 1917 there was a decree established that nationalized all land, including property and possessions held by the Church and monasteries, thereby putting them under the possession and authority of the Soviets of Peasant Deputies and other Soviet land committees.<sup>19</sup> The Separation of Church and State decree of 1918 further complicated things by

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more than half of all monasteries and a drastic reduction in the number of monks and nuns. For half a century after Catherine's secularization, monasticism stagnated in Russia, but in the era of Nicholas I it began a revival that escalated even more rapidly in the post reform period right up to the outbreak of war and revolution. By 1917, there were 1,256 monasteries of all types in the Russian Empire. The number of monks, nuns, and novices grew nearly tenfold in the course of the century before the revolution (from 11,080 in 1825 to 104,512 in 1917), with the most dramatic increase coming in the number of female recruits from the 1880s onward (reaching 77,585 by 1917)." See Scott Kenworthy, "Monasticism in War and Revolution," in *Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22 Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 223.

<sup>17</sup> "Monasteries also became the objects of numerous revolutionary actions during the course of 1917, especially peasant confiscations of monastery land." Ibid., 232-233.

<sup>18</sup> "By contrast with the period between February and October 1917, when monastery lands were sometimes spontaneously seized by local peasants, after October 1917 there were few instances of peasants seizing monastery lands. Rather, the seizure of land was carried out by local revolutionary authorities, ostensibly in the name of the people and against monastic communities as "parasitical" organizations living off the labor of others, even when those monastic communities supported themselves by their own labor and received the support of the local population. In fact, after the Bolshevik Revolution the local population was far more likely to come to the defense of the community than be involved in any action against it... Local commissars or representatives from local soviets conducted searches and requisitions at other monasteries. As 1917 progressed, monasteries felt that the Provisional Government was too weak to ensure their protection, so monastery congresses and the Holy Synod began taking measures to ensure that monasteries could protect themselves by forming (unarmed) brotherhoods of local laity who would come to their defense if the community was threatened. Such brotherhoods would become particularly important after October." Ibid., 236-237, 243-244.

<sup>19</sup> "The decree, however, did not provide details about what was to happen with monastery lands, and it left open the possibility that monastic communities could still occupy their lands so long as they worked them. Further, since it left land in control of local bodies, there was great inconsistency in how those local authorities handled monasteries... The role of monasteries in a revolutionary situation came under consideration when the Russian

no longer allowing the monasteries to exist as legal entities (thereby taking away from them land and property rights) and monastics became regarded as simple citizens. This was put into action in 1918 when the “Liquidation Department” took away all land, property, buildings, and capital of monasteries - a project hoped to be completed within two months.<sup>20</sup> Some concrete examples include the Aleksandro Nevskiaia Lavra in Petrograd, the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, and the Pochaev Lavra.<sup>21</sup> Other monasteries were simply closed down.<sup>22</sup> There were three reasons for such a bold action.

The first was the antirelic campaign: because the relics of saints were most often housed in monasteries, Bolshevik activists believed that exhuming and especially removing saints’ relics should be accompanied by closing the monasteries that housed them and supported their veneration. Second, in the midst of civil war, many Bolsheviks regarded monasteries as “nests of counterrevolution” that needed to be eliminated for the revolution to succeed. Finally, the leadership of the Liquidation Commission believed that one sure way to undermine the church was to destroy its economic power by confiscating monastic property, including land, candle factories, and rental properties.<sup>23</sup>

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Orthodox Church Council (*Sobor*) took up the work of the “Section on Monasteries and Monasticism.” The Council, which began meeting in August 1917, was a major event because it was the first since the 17th century and was called to evaluate all aspects of the church’s life. It worked for a year before being disbanded by the Soviet authorities, but since most of it took place after the Bolshevik Revolution, it was unable to accomplish many of its goals. During meetings in the summer of 1918 the Council discussed many issues that had preoccupied monastic leaders in the past about measures to raise the quality of monastic life. At the same time, it tried to reckon with the conditions under the new regime, simultaneously granting some concessions (dropping its insistence on the legal rights of monasteries, for example) but holding its ground in other areas, such as the church’s exclusive right to determine what happened with monastery lands. Claiming that monasteries were “not only praying but also laboring brotherhoods,” the Council asserted their right to work and possess land under Soviet law.” *Ibid.*, 235-236.

<sup>20</sup> “An April 1918 report from the Nizhnii Novgorod provincial department for the separation of church and state... outlined a systematic process by which it would liquidate diocesan institutions such as the Ecclesiastical Consistory and candle factories, followed by the nationalization of urban monastic properties (*podvor’ia*) and closure of chapels connected to various institutions, inventorying monastery property, and confiscating monastery capital in bank accounts. According to a central report of June 1918, however, local soviets acted on their own authority and confiscated land, capital, and property of monasteries “according to [their] own understanding.” For example, local agencies pilfered money and buildings from the Trinity-Sergius Lavra throughout 1918. Authorities in the city of Moscow expelled all but ten monks from each monastery and forced those remaining into smaller numbers of cells so as to take over the monastery buildings, ostensibly for living quarters.” *Ibid.*, 237-243.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 234-237.

<sup>22</sup> “By the end of 1921, 722 out of 1,103 or 65 percent of the monasteries that had existed before the revolution were closed.” *Ibid.*, 248-249. By 1930 most monasteries were closed down. See also Jennifer Wynot, “Monasteries without Walls: Secret Monasticism in the Soviet Union 1928-39,” *Church History*, Vol. 71, No. 1 (March 2002): 64.

<sup>23</sup> Kenworthy, 238-242.

Monastic communities not only had their property rights taken away, but some were transformed into concentration camps,<sup>24</sup> museums,<sup>25</sup> agricultural collectives, and parish churches.

The most substantial change in the nature or structure of the monasteries worth mentioning in depth were those that were changed into agricultural collectives and parish churches. Some agricultural collective monasteries included the Nikolo-Perervinskii Monastery, Ardatovskii Pokrovskii Monastery, Diveevskii Monastery, Malo-Pitskii Monastery, Ababkovskii Monastery, and Kutuzov Monastery. By 1921, there were about 116 such monastic “agricultural collectives.”<sup>26</sup> The administrators of the agricultural work was not the Abbot or Abbess of a monastery but the Soviets. Monastics that actually worked in the fields to grow crops were allowed to eat the fruit of their labor, whereas those who were either too tired, old, or sick and therefore not capable of contributing to such work were often denied nourishment as a punishment for being “exploitive” of the others’ work - clearly an act of aggression built on Marxism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Kenworthy, “Monasticism in Russian History,” in *Kritia: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, 2 (Spring 2009): 321.

<sup>25</sup> “The commission consisted of theologians, such as the well-known Pavel Florenskii, and experts in iconography and history, especially those who sought to transform the monastery into a “living museum” of classical Russian culture. The monastery itself was only closed a year later.” See Kenworthy, “Monasticism in War and Revolution,” in *Russia’s Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22 Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 240. See also Wynot, 64.

<sup>26</sup> Kenworthy, “Monasticism in War and Revolution,” in *Russia’s Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22 Book 2: The Experience of War and Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2016), 241–247.

<sup>27</sup> “Some monastics bore all the heavy labor and others “exploited” them by living off their labor, and that these latter should be excluded from the monastic collective farms and their support... The Soviets considered the tonsured nuns who spent more of their time with church services to be “parasites” “exploiting” the other sisters, and therefore they were to be excluded from monastic collective farms (even if they were peasants by birth). In practice, however, this meant that elderly or ill nuns who were unable to engage in physical labor were not only excluded from the collective farm but were also deprived of subsistence. Theoretically, these elderly nuns were to be cared for by the Department of Social Security... but in practice that did not happen. Further, Soviet authorities tried to divide up monastic communities so that agricultural labor became a state farm separate from workshops and handicrafts, which would form other types of labor collectives and be registered by Soviet agencies than the Land Committee. This destroyed the convents’ flexibility in assigning and reassigning sisters to different tasks in different seasons.” *Ibid.*, 243–245.

Other monasteries were changed into “parish churches” in which it served and acted like any regular parish in the city with a parish council but its administrators were replaced by the Bolsheviks. These monastic parishes could exist as “religious entities” so long that they agreed to allow the Bolsheviks to occupy and use their facilities and resources such as St. John of Kronstadt’s Ioannovskii Monastery and the Vysoko-Petrovskii monastery in Moscow.<sup>28</sup> Thus, with the overthrow of the government and the initiation of the Soviet Union, monasteries were persecuted through having their property rights regulated and being transformed into labor camps, museums, agricultural collectives, or parish churches.

## **2 b. Exiles, Concentration Camps, Clandestineness, Executions**

The Bolsheviks not only persecuted monastic communities through regulating or stripping them of their property rights but often times would also send monastics into exile, concentration camps, or simply executed them. The first systematic act of exiling and/or arresting and sending monastics to labor camps was in February of 1932. In Leningrad over 300 monks and nuns were captured and exiled to several labor camps in the Soviet Union and over 300 churches were shut down too. In Rostov, over 100 monks and clergy were executed. In the city of Dnepropetrovsk, an underground monastery led by Archimandrite Pimen with ten monks was discovered by the Bolsheviks, exiled, and “sternly dealt with.” Two-thousand nuns were sent to the Arzamasskoi prison camp in Sarov. By 1937, over two-hundred thousand monastics and clergy were executed.<sup>29</sup> “In 1917, 1,025 monasteries existed in the Russian Empire and by 1920 it was reduced to 352. By 1939 most monasteries were closed. In 40 years after this, over 200 of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 242-243. See also Wynot, 68-69.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 70-75. See also Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens* Tsipin: *The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998). See also Vladislav , *Istoriia Russkoi Tserky* (Moscow: Valaam Monastery, 1997), 9:197. See also Serafima Bulgakov, *Diveevo Predaniia* (Moscow: 1996), 53

them would cease to exist. By 1958, after Stalin had been dead for nearly 6 years only 69-70 monasteries still existed.”<sup>30</sup>

When monastics were not captured, exiled or executed, many monastics strove to live secretive double lives.<sup>31</sup> Some people would outwardly live a secular lifestyle such as doctors, nurses, teachers or field-workers but inwardly and secretly tried adhering to monastic vows and prayer life without a formal monastic tonsure. For example, Nina Frolova was a surgeon in the city but when at home lived a monastic lifestyle with her sister and three eldressess they kept in hiding. Likewise, Mother Serafima was given a monastic tonsure by a bishop in 1922 and continued to work as a nurse and study medicine.<sup>32</sup> Other monastics chose to sever their ties with the outside world completely and seclude themselves in the forests to be fully concentrated on their monastic calling. For example, Nun Anna of Moscow grew up with atheists parents and eventually ran away into the wilderness without their permission or foreknowledge. Likewise, “after serving a prison sentence for “counter-revolutionary activities,” Abbess Antonina of Kizliar took twelve nuns and went to the town of Tuapse where she founded a secret monastery in the mountains.”<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Mother Agna fled to the forest after her monastery was officially shut down and destroyed.<sup>34</sup> Other monastics found refuge in the homes of bishops and parishioners or met up with fellow monastics and pious Christians in cemeteries to discuss religious matters under the disguise of regular civilians visiting and praying for their departed

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<sup>30</sup> Marite Sapiets, “Monasticism in the Soviet Union,” *Religion in Communist Lands*, Vol. 4 (1976): 28.

<sup>31</sup> Tatianna Vladimirovna, “Optina Elder Sebastian: Schema-Archimandrite of Karaganda,” *The Orthodox Word* (1990): 235-236.

<sup>32</sup> Wynot, 67-68.

<sup>33</sup> “News of this haven spread throughout the underground monastic network, and soon many nuns who were escaping persecution joined Abbess Antonina's group. In the same area there were also fourteen monks who lived and worshiped in nearby caves and helped the nuns survive. When they were discovered by the secret police in 1927, most of the monks and nuns were immediately shot. As the leader, Abbess Antonina was arrested and taken away. Her exact fate remains unknown.” *Ibid.*, 67-70.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

loved ones. There is evidence also of some monastics such as Abbess Rufina from Perm and the nuns with her who lived like itinerants, always on the move in order to not be detected and caught.<sup>35</sup> Overall, monastics under Soviet rule experienced harsh conditions when they came across the Bolsheviks either through exile, concentration camps, or brutal and inhumane execution.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Twentieth century Russia underwent an overthrow in government by the atheistic Bolsheviks which led to monastic communities being confiscated, disbanded, and having their property rights restricted or stripped away as well as its monastics martyred, exiled, sent into labor camps, and forced to experience clandestineness. It is interesting to note, however, that as secrete monastic A. E. Levitin-Krasnov explains, in spite of the persecution going on and difficult decisions monastics had to make there was also a deepening in spirituality found in many laymen and monastics.<sup>36</sup> The Bolsheviks could never seem to fully eradicate monasticism like they hoped for which could be a reason for why the 1936 Stalin Constitution was established that allowed clergy political rights "... such as voting and the freedom to run for office - a radical shift in relations between state and church since the clergy were for so long marginalized from this arena."<sup>37</sup> As time went on, monastics found ways to prosper more freely, such as Mother

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<sup>35</sup> "This practice of using graves as informal churches hearkened back to the days of early Christianity, when persecuted Christians met in the catacombs to pray and gain strength. In many ways, Christianity had come full circle; from tombs to elaborate cathedrals, and back to tombs... Monastics always had to be on the move in order to avoid detection. This was especially true in circumstances where their monastic communities were totally destroyed or closed down. Such monastics became "wanderers" and would float from monastery to monastery or live in the wilderness. They even had to form double monasteries sometimes too, that is, men and women sharing the same monastery grounds or having two monastic communities sharing the same property but with separate facilities." Ibid., 65-70, 78-79. See also Dan Stramara, "Double Monasticism in the Greek East," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 43 (Spring-Winter 1998): 185-202.

<sup>36</sup> Wynot, 66, 71-72.

<sup>37</sup> "In giving the right to vote to our opponents... we are giving them the responsibility to participate in society" (President Kalinin). Ibid, 72-73.

Anatolia who bought a house with two other nuns living close by.<sup>38</sup> In all, twentieth century Russian Orthodox Christian Monasticism demonstrates that although it was more than often secluded from the outside world it nevertheless was in the world, though “not of the world”, and as a consequence, came under Bolshevik rule and suffered great injustice. But by the grace of God, through being faithful even unto death they were granted the crowns of eternal life (Rev. 2:9 NKJV). Glory to God! Amen!

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 77.



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